

6

Gender Practices

In the previous chapters, we looked at masculinity and femininity in the context of specific ideas on the one hand, and as a feature of historical development on the other. Ideas, we realized, are real, possess real effects. Yet they do not exist by themselves, specific social and economic structures which had evolved over a period of time have given birth to and structured these ideas. Now it remains to be seen how ideas are actualized in practice, what makes a certain norm work in a specific circumstance and why. In this section, we will look at some commonplace injunctions about masculinity and femininity and trace out the dense network of people and systems through which ideas are experienced, accepted or rejected.

Before we set out exploring these injunctions that we receive, interpret and live out, as men and women, we need to be clear about two things. Firstly, though gender differences reflect and express complex economic and social relationships of power, they are also lived differences, that is, norms of masculinity and femininity are real and experienced as real by most of us. We do not see in them a configuration of power and authority. Secondly, gender differences are crucial to human relationships, in fact, gender, as such, supposes and implies a relationship. When we refer to masculinity and femininity, we refer not to two unrelated categories but to two inextricably and intimately linked ones. Men and

women accept or subvert norms in the immediate context of their relationship to each other.

Gender relationships involve intimacies and enmities; love and hatred, affection and violence, power and abjection, hurt and surrender. Human beings play out their destinies in and through a combination of these emotions and the acts which are inspired by them. They also come to and acquire a sense of themselves, their needs and desires in the course of living these relationships. To understand those affective and experiential elements which are central to human self-perceptions—as men or women—we need to identify those qualities and acts which mark men and women as different and yet complementary. Most of these qualities and acts are aspects of our physical existence; that is, we feel, are and live as men and women, or as neither, in and through our bodies. In this sense, the human body is not only corporeal, it also becomes the locus of sexual identity, of familial and social roles, as well as sexual self-awareness and expectations. We may thus profitably examine expressions of gender which revolve around the human body to understand how and why it is so difficult—and yet necessary—to challenge given notions of masculinity and femininity.

Common and even routine expressions of gender are centred on what we shall refer to as practices of the body: whether this has to do with how we look, that is, the means through which we seek to express our femaleness or maleness; or with experiences of the body, such as sexual love, sport, religion; or with injunctions to the body, notions of discipline, restraint, control.

The human body is schooled into looking, acting, desiring, expressing and controlling its movements in a certain way through a range of institutions and agents (people who actually direct and lead others or seek to influence them) as well as ideas and beliefs. The family, school, media, religious and cultural organizations, and within these, individuals, such as parents, teachers,

peers, religious leaders, cultural icons, like film or rock stars, provide norms, role models as well as exercise power and influence over us. We also respond to ideas implicit in and expressed as custom, myth, ritual, in art, literature and music.

For our purposes, I propose to look at the schooling of the body in terms of appearance, experience and discipline. In the context of gender, these would translate into Norms of Male and Female Beauty; Norms of Sexuality and Motherhood and Norms of Control. I propose to demonstrate how these norms are actualized, and identify crucial and important institutions and ideas which enable this actualization.

APPEARANCE

Very few people seriously dispute a widely accepted notion: that beauty becomes a woman, whereas virility becomes a man. Widely different cultures subscribe to this maxim. The idea may be found, in one form or another, at several periods in human history. Why was it—and is—deemed important for women to look beautiful and men to be virile? At its simplest, beauty as a physical marker distinguishes women from men—women are those who take great care over their appearance, whereas men care chiefly about their prowess, the energy and ability that allows them to do and act as they wish. But beauty and virility possess other meanings as well.

The Body Beautiful

Notions of beauty are normative, that is, they exist as rules, even imperatives to which the woman's body must adhere. These rules change from time to time and are varied. In all circumstances, and in all historical epochs, they are directed at women from the outside. Yet women accept, respond enthusiastically to, and actualize these rules—sometimes even creating the conditions in which a particular set of rules may be re-made.

Who makes these beauty rules? Often beauty rules do

not exist in themselves. They are expressed as aspects of a feminine ideal that all women ought necessarily to want to emulate. This ideal, in turn, is defined, framed and expressed in the art, literature, law and culture of a particular historical epoch. Paintings, drawings, sculpture and literary representations of women comprise the most obvious expressions of this idea. If we are to review critically the literature or art of a period for the feminine ideal it upheld, we would find that in almost all instances this ideal had been articulated by men. Let us take European pictorial art as an example. Whether the feminine ideal was defined throughout the image of Mary, mother of God, or through various queens and aristocratic women, it was men—artists and sculptors—who fashioned the ideal. And it was these men, and the patrons who supported their work, who set standards and measures of female beauty.

What were these standards based on? In some instances, on contemporary notions of perfection, which often had to do with symmetry of form, colour, and so on. In some cases, standards of beauty derived from character: Mary, mother of God, was both good and beautiful. Or, conversely, real beauty was believed to express itself through goodness. Others held that beauty can only be measured through the purpose it served. If beauty induced lust or encouraged lasciviousness, then it was not considered true beauty. If, on the other hand, beauty called attention to a woman's modesty, chastity and goodness of temper, it was to be honoured. Sometimes, beauty was also defined in a differentiated sort of way, that is, several measures were employed even within the same historical period. Thus there was the shy beauty of the bride, the brazen beauty of the seductress, the regal air which marked queenly good looks.

Fundamentally, though, beauty was a product of ideas and opinions, entertained and expressed by men about women. Measures of beauty were outlined and framed by their brushes, chisels and pens. In this sense, we may say

that the ideal of female beauty expressed in European pictorial art, though diverse, was framed by the ‘male gaze’. The male gaze treated women as objects. Women’s beauty was an object for male creativity and imagination to shape, manipulate and transform. Men were driven thus to objectify women by felt notions of pleasure, gratification and desire.

What granted men the power and, more important, the authority to thus view women as objects? The power they wielded in real life—as fathers, husbands, noblemen, kings—and the access they enjoyed to education and the learning of the creative arts. In this sense, the male gaze may be said to represent the visceral, emotional and psychological expression of male authority, the crucial node in the complex network of relationships which characterize patriarchal society.

Women, socially powerless, and lacking the means to express themselves, consented to be these objects, thus submitting themselves to beauty rules in whose making they had played almost no role. Fixed in a range of roles and ideals which served as veritable mirrors in which they were asked to view themselves, women learnt to recognize and accept these various beauty norms as their own. That is, they imagined them to be given, possessing universal value. The male gaze triumphed precisely on this account: by establishing itself as a way of seeing and framing that is natural to the human eye. The male gaze is not peculiar to Europe. It may be found in all cultures. This is not surprising, since in almost all cultures, men, rather than women, had access to learning and the arts.

In our own time, both in India and elsewhere, the fashion industry, media personalities and media representations embody and express the power of the male gaze. They create role models, urge women to look this way and that, promote products which, they claim, will enhance or even enable one to be beautiful. The norms set by those in the beauty business serve to define not

only the most beautiful woman in the world, but also offer a particular definition of femininity. In this instance, the ideal feminine type is thin, elegant, works hard to be beautiful, diets, exercises, is not averse to intelligent conversation, but is not on that account an intellectual woman, loves to do charity, and ultimately longs to settle into a marriage of love. This ideal is both contemporary and historical. It is powerful and appealing, because it aligns traditional feminine attributes to a modern purpose, while emphasizing that though women today are prone to show off their bodies, they are, nonetheless what women have always been: home-makers.

The creation of such ideals and norms is seldom a one-way process. As we have just noted, women consent to be objects, in fact, seek out this object status. For example, the ‘Miss Universe’ body ideal that was so assiduously cultivated by the media in urban India during the mid-1990s was eagerly and avidly consumed by tens of thousands of young middle class and lower middle class urbanites and suburbanites growing up in the shadow of the American fashion and entertainment industry. These young women had come of age at a time when India was busy integrating its economy into the global market. Western cosmetics were now widely and easily available, so was Western television. The thin emaciated look favoured by international fashion designers—one of whom claimed that a body was merely a hanger for her garment creations to be displayed to advantage—soon became popular among a class of teenagers here. The fashion and media interests encouraged and applauded this popular interest in an ideal that had originally been fashioned in North America. They organized and supported contests and events around this new beauty norm.

The point is, women and girls, by actively desiring a certain sort of body or particular image, participate in the making of beauty norms. Ultimately, of course, the fashion and media industry gain a great deal out of the

beauty business. Yet we cannot discount the role of individual women and girls who endorse and buy into these beauty norms and thereby actualize and perpetuate them. This has remained a vexed question with feminists: Are women victims of the beauty business or collaborators? Historically, notions of female beauty have served to render women as objects—of male desire, consumption and use. Yet given their general state of powerlessness, women have used their status as objects to gain favour with men and acquire a measure of power and authority for themselves.

Feminists argue that the ideal of beauty has to be viewed as a construction, a myth imposed on women. They claim that this myth serves a particular purpose in patriarchal society. For one, it divides women into the pleasing and the plain. In a context where so-called plain looks are considered valueless and, worse, a disadvantage for women, all women aspire to re-make themselves. Those who cannot live up to the norm are afflicted with a sense of inadequacy, guilt and jealousy, and most of all a corrosive anxiety that they would meet with male disapproval and indifference.

This is something quite commonplace: one has only to examine critically advertisements for cosmetics to realize how both copy and image respond with fine precision to these fears and anxieties. Though the product advertised may be anything—soap, perfume, deodorant—the message often has less to do with a particular product's worth, than with how it enables one to appear confident and poised about one's appearance. Copy and image also imply that if one did not use such and such product, one will have to live with fear, of being left out of the beauty race, ignored and teased. A mesh of emotions, ideas and institutions thus help to cajole subtly, threaten and convince women that a certain sort of beauty ideal is essential to and even fundamental to their sense of themselves as worthy persons.

The beauty ideal impinges on female identity in another fundamental way. It enables women to delight intensely in their becoming objects of the male gaze. That is, women assume their object status with pleasure, as if it became them. The question of their desire, their subjectivity, is thus resolved within the terms of pleasure and power contained in the male gaze. Thus, in some instances, women even claim that they can best realize themselves through an active and defiant cultivation of their bodily good looks. Others, especially beauty queens and fashion models, have gone a step further: they maintain that they experience a measure of individual freedom in thus expressing themselves.

These experiences of power and freedom are by no means false as the adherence to the beauty norm does confer power and privilege to those who practise it. Moreover, as just noted, women have historically utilized their beauty to attain positions of authority and power. Yet both the freedom and power thus cultivated by women are severely circumscribed, for they are to be enjoyed only for a very short time. For beauty is feted, praised and adored as long as the flush of youth remains. As a woman ages, she is not considered fit enough to represent the beauty whims of the season. Besides, the experience of freedom and power, even during the short enchanted moment that it lasts, comes with a price. The body has to be tutored, disciplined, and manipulated in accordance with norms that may or may not afford oneself health or comfort. Finally, a woman feels empowered and free by transforming herself into an object. In the process, she fails to see that she is really not making a choice, but merely working a pre-given and limited role to advantage.

Of course, not all social institutions and individuals are equally convinced of or impressed by ideals of beauty as they obtain in a particular moment in history. Thus, at any given time, there may exist competing definitions of beauty. For instance, certain sections of the media,

such as those which cater to family interests and audiences, may re-define the beauty norm. Rather than grant total and unqualified support to the body beautiful, they may insist on judging a girl and woman through other measures. Housekeeping skills, modesty, patience may all be called into the service of re-defining the beauty ideal. Likewise, religious institutions may declare an obsession with the body as sinful, an example of selfish absorption in oneself. Rather—and they would argue thus—beauty consists in being simple and selfless, in ideals of quiet charity.

Yet even those who reject the beauty ideal and seek to define femaleness in terms of character and inner worth seldom dispute the idea that beauty is central to experiences and expressions of womanhood. They may speak instead of inner beauty, the beauty that lies at the heart of goodness, in the clarity of the mind or in the piety of the soul. Nor do these dissenting ideals of beauty question the manner in which a woman's sense of herself is almost always linked to her ability to make herself into an object, for approval by and for the enjoyment and pleasure of men.

On the other hand, feminism has created a discursive and political space for the active critique of beauty, whether as myth, big business or an object of the male gaze. Likewise, a radical culture of homosexuality, with its emphasis on same-sex love and comradeship, has deconstructed the very notion of the male gaze, though in some instances, homosexual couples, like men and women, construct themselves as active and passive partners. Yet expressions of homosexual love do attempt to transcend that objectification of the (female) body which is central to everyday romance. They do this through a range of strategies: individualistic celebrations of the body; a non-monogamous sexual philosophy and chiefly through expressions of non-genital sexuality. Male and female bodies thus enter into relationships without their genital identities being central to their coming together.

Mark of a Man

Male virility possesses a different social and individual response. If beauty is a norm constructed by the male gaze, virility is an ideal, a norm that emerges from within the masculine body. It is as if virility is a condition of maleness, in an obvious organic sort of way. Thus virility is an ideal that encourages, enables an expression outwards. It calls for the male body to forge ahead, pursue adventure and heroic action, seek sexual pleasure and satisfaction, conquest and power. Unlike the beauty ideal which demands that women transform themselves into objects, and which coaxes women to measure themselves against an external norm, virility persuades men to be subjects of their destiny, urges them towards active secular and social self-expression.

Once again the example of European art is instructive. Male figures, whether in painting or sculpture, are seldom passive. They are almost always dynamic: doing, performing, suffering, in short, acting out their desires and will. Female figures, to reiterate a point made earlier, are passive objects meant to kindle a range of emotions in the predominantly male viewer: from the maternal to the carnal.

It is not accidental that non-virile men are viewed as suffering from an inner lack. They are usually considered maimed, disabled and feminine. Women who are not and who do not aspire to be beautiful are not seen as internally lacking; they are unpleasant to the viewing male eye, objects of fun and satire, creatures who embody wickedness and evil. That is, ugly women are seen both as subversive of the male gaze—hence they have to be mocked—and threatening, hence the insinuation of evil.

In our contemporary world, the male body too has been consigned to object status. Men appear in advertisements, revealing their bodies, showing off a fine back or a pair of strong legs. Yet, male identity is not exclusively dependent on their looks, it continues to be an

adjunct of the power they enjoy and experience. So-called ugly men can still find themselves beautiful wives, for the measure of their success or importance is not their looks. Rather it is their wealth and power. This brings us to a rather important social truth: male virility is a measure of the actual authority men enjoy, enforce and sustain. Men are expected to express themselves through physical—and other—acts of heroism and adventure, through their forays into the outer world, because they are seen as natural heirs to authority, just as women are viewed as naturally passive and susceptible to being objects. Clearly, beauty and virility are not mere attributes through which we recognize the quintessential feminine and masculine. Rather, they are the means through which women and men express and experience themselves. Besides, they underlie male-female interactions and affect their most intimate encounters with each other.

How do women and men experience this identity, both in relationship to themselves and to each other? Before we go on to consider this question, we need to understand that masculinity is neither cohesive nor consistent. It is always constructed, made to seem powerful and the norm. This of course implies that such a norm does not exist naturally and has to be articulated forcibly. This is because, as we saw, many men simply cannot afford to be masculine in the way we have described it. This is because they are not powerful, being lower class, lower caste and poor. Or it could be because they are not considered or do not consider themselves to be typically masculine: gay men, for instance, or men who are shy, gentle, retiring; or because they are the wrong colour: as blacks, or browns or other non-white colours, they are more or less masculine, but never the norm.

EXPERIENCE

Beauty and virility and a range of other emotions and attributes associated with them are central to the way

we experience ourselves. They construct us as human beings who possess certain kinds of bodies, destined to play out certain sorts of roles. They grant meaning to our sense of our own bodies, shape and influence our sexual lives.

The Experiences of Femininity

The male gaze images women as objects of both pleasure and use. Women's bodies are to yield to men's needs. However, these needs are complex. Men desire women as lovers, wives, mothers of their children, whores, aesthetic objects, ideals. These desires elicit and demand different sorts of female bodies (and beauties). Generally, though, in most cultures, the beauty ideal translates itself into two distinctive yet paired types: the wife and the concubine, the lover and the vamp, the good woman and the bad woman. That is, female beauty is granted two markets; the licit and the illicit. Licit beauty is tame, regular, passive; illicit beauty, wild, sensuous, seductive and aggressive. The one is meant for domestic conjugal use, pleasure and significance, linked to marriage and motherhood. The other is in fact a public beauty—indicating sexual availability, a dangerous female power and bearing the marks of the forbidden.

The male gaze has so imprinted itself on all our major social, cultural and religious institutions that the norms of femininity are defined, interpreted and expressed chiefly through this paired idea, though in real life, women's roles and functions are diverse and answer a variety of male and female needs. But whether it is folklore, literature, religious tales, art, sculpture, the plots of theatre and cinema: the paired ideal, of the good wife and the seductive mistress, may be found in all of them. In some representations, the non-domestic female body may be accorded a tender and sympathetic treatment, in others, it may be castigated as evil and sinful. In some, the good, dutiful body of the wife may be made to undergo terrible privations, while the bad, beautiful

body of the witch or the dancer may revel in its own sensuousness. All sorts of combinations exist, some more nuanced, some less so. In some, the line dividing the paired ideal is rather thin, a phenomenon that we observe in the American star Madonna; or in our own context, in the film heroines of the 1990s in Hindi and Tamil cinema and theatre.

The paired ideal is significant in another respect: it suggests a norm and a deviation from the norm. In fact, the norm and its deviation, the wife and the mistress, or the lover and the vamp, are defined in mutual terms. The licit/illicit basis to this pairing is central to the way several societies order their conjugal and familial lives. In several parts of India, for instance, a good family is defined as one where the women of the family are honourable, that is, where they guard their chastity with their very lives. The chaste wife is so essential to her family's stability, that she is often enjoined to remain indulgent towards her husband, even if he were wayward and promiscuous, because if she were to nag, complain or leave him, the family would be plunged into disrepute. Conversely, she is raised on stories of sexually violated women killing themselves out of shame, suffering enormous guilt and going mad. She is told of what happens to women who desire too much, whether food, clothing or sex. That is, she is schooled not only to be a good and loyal wife, but also not to be a woman who is the very obverse of the good woman. All this affects her sense of self profoundly, as we shall soon see.

Since the beginning of the modern world, from at least the time of the French Revolution of 1789 and the coming of the industrial revolution, the roles and functions available to women changed dramatically. This happened in different ways and at different paces throughout the world. In all those contexts where the effects of the French and industrial revolutions were felt, new ideas of democracy, female equality and female economic independence combined to produce new role

models for women. Women could now actually find work in distant towns and factories, where they were paid a wage that reduced their dependence on men's income. The new culture of democracy enabled them to think through the question of their rights. Women workers, intellectuals, artists, women who started cooperatives, trade unions, through their lives, work and struggles embodied a new female ideal, animated by female self-worth, independence, sexual daring and a desire to change the world, to make it more egalitarian, for both men and women. More important, they could stand the beauty ideal on its head, challenge and mock at a male gaze which was content to image women as passive and malleable.

The new ideal though required courage and energy. Some women found both, inspired by new found solidarities that were forged between women in trade unions, reading clubs, friendships, through letters, shared ideas and interests. Others found themselves in radical political circles which accepted them, though at times radical men too were bewildered and even annoyed by the self-assurance and earnest desire to know and act which these women exhibited. But for many others, this ideal appeared threatening. It simply demanded too much from them. For as the historian Gerda Lerner has pointed out, intelligent and self-confident women stood to lose the love of the men in their lives. Though there were supportive fathers and husbands, they remained exceptions. Several women who staked claims to equality and independence, who announced themselves to be feminists had to struggle with men—fathers, brothers, lovers, husbands. Then, there was also the problem of economic independence. To live by a profession, a skill demanded a high degree of confidence and for many women, used to finding economic security within marriage, this option did not appear attractive. Even working class women, at times, wished to exchange their everyday labour and drudgery for the security and

comforts of conjugal and familial existence.

Thus, even today, nearly two centuries and more after the modern world emerged, the new feminine-feminist ideal has not won for itself a great many converts. Women's sense of self continues to be influenced, even determined by the old, paired ideal. As we have noted earlier, women are fundamentally anxious, tentative about themselves. Would their looks please or escape notice? If they do not fall in love and cannot marry, what is to become of them? What awaits a woman if she cannot attain wifehood and motherhood?

The anxieties of women are compounded by the fact that they cannot view themselves, experience themselves, without being reminded of the ultimate destinies which await their bodies. Besides, as we have said earlier, they are haunted, troubled, and compelled to adhere to those functions and destinies allocated to them by the threat of dishonour. They dare not think intimate, significant thoughts about their needs and desires, for fear of becoming those 'other' women, who are always what they are not. Thus, the desire to please and be pleasing, and the anxieties which accompany this desire persuade women, in fact, enable them actively to seek out romance, marriage and childbearing as much desired vocations.

The question arises: are these anxieties and this desire to please and answer to the needs of the male gaze common to all women? What about poor, lower caste and working class women? The lives of poor, labouring women revolve around work and survival. For many of them, their bodies are instruments of work. It is not that working class, lower caste women do not delight in colour, texture, in the aesthetic. But looking beautiful is always an indulgence, an act of luxury they reserve for themselves when they have extra time and money. Though they do make themselves up into figures that seek to elicit approval from men, there is also a certain self-delighting quality to their desire to look pretty. More fundamentally, though, their bodies are as bound to de-

fined roles and functions. They are expected to love, marry and bear children and suffer great sorrow if this destiny veers away from them. The conditions of their existence, one of survival and labour, however, mediate their experience of love, sexuality and work.

Work is central to their lives, inextricably linked to being alive, being able to feed their children. Work allows even the most wretched of working women to experience a sense of her skill, her self-sufficiency, feelings that are alien and threatening to middle class women. This necessarily influences working women's attitudes towards love and sexual desire. They are less troubled by notions of womanly and familial honour. This does not mean that they are habitually sexually free or daring. Their status as workers, visible in the public world, renders them sexually vulnerable. This vulnerability becomes part of the conditions under which they labour, hence they set no special premium on their sexuality. They know that it can be abused. As dalit women say ironically and sadly, their bodies are seldom untouchable to landlords and contractors who employ them, though these men otherwise practise untouchability.

On the other hand, working class, lower caste women do feel empowered to walk out of unhappy marriages in the confidence that they can support themselves. They may feel as committed to marriage and motherhood, but when they think they have a choice, they walk away more easily and with less guilt from a situation of violence and indifference. A common faith and commitment to motherhood, however, may be seen to inspire women across classes and communities. We shall shortly consider why this should be so.

ROMANCE MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

Let us examine a little closely women's sense of romance, marriage and motherhood. In the Indian context, romantic fantasies are fulsomely and unashamedly expressed in and through the medium of cinema. It is

film that has granted voice, style, gesture and content to modern Indian notions of romance. Likewise, it is film that provides enabling wifely and maternal role models. This does not mean that real life imitates cinema or that cinema accurately reflects existing gender sensibilities. Films constitute an important expression of social consciousness, resonate in complex ways to feel social needs and aspirations. In this qualified sense, films grant us clues about how a society publicly thinks out its positions on gender.

Romance in Indian cinema centres around that peculiar thing, 'body chemistry'. The camera attempts to capture the play of this chemistry in any number of inventive ways. In the early and middle decades of Indian cinema as well as in the late twentieth century, the camera performed to a certain grammar. For the young woman, romance was and still is possible and exciting only under conditions of subterfuge and dissimulation. The audience willingly suspends disbelief, accepting and enjoying what, in real life, they would baulk at—in the secure knowledge that the surreptitious coming together of lovers augurs a happy and legitimate marriage and the restoration of order, at the end of the film. However, this aura of subterfuge communicates to the young female viewer a model of female desire that is furtive, afraid, and yet secretly—or brazenly—lustful. Tainted with the whiff of the forbidden, the woman—both the character in the film and the viewer—anticipates with excitement and delight the mysteries of conjugal love. The film takes the viewer and the character through a tortuous plot that ends on an amicable note. Meanwhile, the female viewer is left with the sense that her own being has to be carefully preserved through romance and lust for the chaste marriage bed.

The point is that romance in the Indian context is necessarily shrouded in secrecy and guilt. It induces desire, lust and longing, but ultimately refuses to grant these emotions any validity, unless they are expressed in

the context of future conjugalit. Thus the experience of marriage becomes central to female sexual discovery, and often this proves to be traumatic. This is not only because many young brides are uninformed about sexual love, but because it binds them to a relationship they cannot easily refute. For, intimacies, especially sexual and erotic ones, can be imagined, experienced and rendered legitimate only within marriage. This, in turn, means that no bride can afford to desert her marriage, even if it proves to be abusive, because in her sense of it such a desertion connotes a betrayal of her own body, its sexual trust and intimacy.

Such a knowledge of her sexuality allows the young bride very few options; she dare not desire in ways that may subvert the sanctity of her marriage bed. Further, she cannot, must not, voice out her displeasure or hurt over her husband's sexual behaviour. Above all, she has to live with the burden of a bound sexuality. This knowledge of herself and the multiple material burdens that wifedom thrusts on her together make the young bride's life harsh, painful and sad. Of course, no woman accepts her position as such—there are bound to be negotiations, subtle threats, refusals on her part as well. But the point is the logic of the male gaze works such that destined to marry, she cannot escape her sexual fate.

Once again, we may look to film for productive instances of how women are enabled and enable themselves to lead the lives they do. Recently, the notion of romance has undergone several changes in Indian cinema, but marriage continues to be viewed in the ideal light that had been reserved for it, from very early on. This is more so for women than men. Even in movies that push romance to the edge, portraying sexually defiant heroines and pathological and obsessive heroes, the romantic heroine is ultimately re-figured as the dutiful, loving, self-abnegating wife. At a more inchoate level of consciousness, women experience their status as wives as precious and mysterious, since it is their only access to sexual love

and the intimacies it fosters. Whatever be their actual experiences of this love, they surround it with a certain aura that renders the married state extremely desirable.

The wifely image is rendered attractive through a complex of strategies. A knowing and passive acceptance of a husband's abuse, the symbolism that surrounds the married state, mangalsutra, kumkum, bangles, flowers, the delicious pleasure that women experience when they realize that their self-sacrifice, sorrow and martyrdom grant them an ineffable power over others—all these combine to represent wifedom as a worthy and fulfilling state. Besides, only by being a wife do women obtain a measure of self-possession, composure. Wifedom allows a woman to exercise responsibility and power in her immediate kinship and familial circle—she can plot marriages, negotiate dowries, play an active role in securing her husband's interest within the joint or extended family, anticipate and plan for the even more fulfilling role of motherhood.

We can also see how women are, in fact, prepared for their romantic and conjugal vocations through social rituals and customs. The little girl's sense of her body is informed by a sense of shame; she cannot show her underwear, she must learn to sit with her legs together. As she grows up, she realizes that her body, which she had learnt to hide and guard, is meant for a certain and higher destiny. Puberty rituals mark her coming of age, marking her body in an unmistakable manner, drawing attention to its fertility. These rituals also fill her with a sense of pride. Now she is almost a woman, ready to take her place along with other adult women in her community.

The imperatives to be female and wifely in particular sorts of ways affect women who have different sexual preferences in complex ways. Lesbian love is forced into hiding, and, worse, has to consent to heterosexual practices which come in the wake of marriage. Women who are clear that they do not desire heterosexual marriage have found it hard to construct other sorts of lives for

themselves. Very few role models exist and they necessarily live out their lives in shadows. This has led several women to enter into suicide pacts, to run away, contract informal marriage arrangements ('maitri' unions).

Women's experience of motherhood is more complex. Romance and marriage are more clearly and transparently linked to issues of social status and economic security, whereas motherhood is experienced as something intensely personal, pertaining to the individual woman's most intimate sense of herself. Firstly, it is an identifiable female physical condition. A woman bears a child in her womb and it shows. Secondly, motherhood is also an experience that the female body feels in every pore of its corporeal being—so much so that the emotions, feelings and thoughts it evokes are not easily separable from the actual body from which these emanate. It is hardly surprising then that women associate their sense of motherhood and their understanding of it with a natural, given state.

This has several implications. If a woman cannot be a mother, she feels guilty, as if it is her fault, as if her body has betrayed itself and her. Women also imagine that whatever else they are or may do, their ultimate destiny is linked with motherhood. Thus successful, professional women, women who have decided to stay single, women who long to get married and have a child, but who cannot, for whatever reason, at some point in their lives, all of them feel inadequate, unfulfilled and somehow less of a woman. Most women unquestioningly accept that mothering is an exclusive female activity and if they cannot attain that state or do justice to it, though they have attained it, feel they have failed their essential vocation. Working mothers, for instance, experience a sense of utter helplessness when a child falls ill or has failed in her exams—they feel it is their responsibility and these problems could have been averted, had they stayed at home and been good, caring mothers.

On the other hand, motherhood is also a social institution: custom, culture and history do influence women's perceptions and experience of motherhood. For example, in late eighteenth-century France, several urban middle class and lower middle class women, including young working mothers who had come to the city to make a living, used to send their children away to rural wet nurses till they were weaned. These surrogate mothers were paid for their ability to breastfeed these alien children. In this society, being a mother was not central to a woman's sense of herself. She seems to have adopted a rather pragmatic attitude towards the experience.

To consider another example: a different dimension to motherhood existed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. African-American slave women were employed by their white mistresses as wet nurses. Often these women had to neglect their own children or leave them to fend for themselves. African-American children could be beaten and put to work on the great sugar and cotton plantations. In these circumstances, a slave mother had to fight ferociously to prevent her child from being abused. Sometimes she suffered beatings and whips so that her children could be saved from the master's wrath. In certain circumstances, African-American women are known to have killed their children rather than submit them to the cruelty of the white plantation owners.

Clearly, like other institutions that we have created, motherhood too possesses specific social meanings. Yet there are very few moments in history when it was not considered a woman's destiny or vocation. Though different social arrangements existed for the care of children, rarely did these involve men. It was almost as if the child was an extension of the woman's body, her very self, and she or other women had to assume sole and responsible care for it.

How and why did women accept these social arrangements? Partly because many of them were unable to

separate their experience of motherhood from the social meanings that had come to be invested in it. But there existed—and these reasons are valid for the present as well—other reasons why women wore this role well and ably. For one, motherhood allows women a measure of agency which wifehood denied them—the children are theirs, to raise as they desire, to feel and coddle, as their own. Secondly, being a mother has its familial and social compensations; her status within the immediate kinship network is enhanced, once she becomes a mother, especially if she has borne a male infant. Literature, social custom and consensus view her as the child's primary teacher and guide.

Across cultures, the mother's role is a dynamic and powerful one. Women have and continue to utilize the power they wield over their children to their advantage. One may argue that this is a pyrrhic sort of power, exercised well within the long shadow of patriarchy: yet in actual life, this power earns rewards and authority. This is especially evident—in the Indian context, at least—in the influence mothers command with grown-up sons, the authority that older women, especially mothers-in-law, enjoy over younger women, and, most important, in the pride with which mothers persuade and entreat their daughters to accept and live out the destinies and vocations which had propelled their own lives.

Most of us are familiar with the image of the domineering and heartless mother-in-law. Indeed many of us concerned with questions of women's rights and freedom are often asked to account for the 'fact' that women are women's worst enemies. This observation annoys us, makes us impatient with the interlocutor, often a man, but in many instances, women as well. Usually, we are likely to respond, a trifle bitterly, that such conflicts are to be expected in a patriarchal social order where women's power is a pale reflection of the real power wielded by men. But clearly this does not explain or help the truly confused make sense of the vicious and deeply felt jeal-

ousy and anxiety contained in the mother-in-law's attitude towards her son's young bride. Afraid of losing her place in her son's life, helpless before the curious and happy sexuality of the young woman, determined to put to use a power that has eluded her when she was young, and which is now hers, the mother-in-law is not merely a victim of a system, but also one of its constituent elements. This power is directed not only at the young wife but also at the son. He, for his part, has to establish his primordial loyalties to his mother, while negotiating an independent conjugal life for himself.

Less familiar and understood, but equally ubiquitous is the mother's role in her daughter's life. The mother schools her female child into a disciplinary regime, involving the body, emotions, the mind and consciousness. In most cultures, and in India especially, it is the mother who instils in the girl child a sense of her difference. She does this, firstly, by carefully covering her genitalia. As the child grows, she is watchful of her development, she admonishes her, were she to sit or stand in a particular way. She makes sure the little girl is dressed daintily, prettily. She teaches the child to regard housework as legitimately hers. By the time the child is self-aware, she knows that as a girl, she must never do anything to attract shameful attention, that she should guard her body, and learn to be patient, quiet and await her turn. When she attains puberty, the mother is both excited and afraid; happy that the girl is now ready for her destiny, worried that now her 'maidenhood' has to be carefully protected until she is handed over to the further and ultimate protection of her husband. The point is the mother repeats and replays the various little feminine dramas that had informed her own childhood and adolescence in her daughter's life, almost gleeful that the state of subordination in which she had lived is not hers alone anymore.

Again, as with notions of beauty, the experiences of femininity have been thoroughly criticized and re-inter-

preted by feminists. Feminists have stressed on women's right to sexual pleasure, challenged the submissive role assigned to the wife, declared that motherhood ought to be enabling and empowering rather than restricting and limiting. Likewise, radical female homosexuals, some of whom are active in the women's movements, have flaunted their experiences of both gender and sexuality as proof that there is nothing given about women's roles, their bodily functions.

Masculine Lives

Masculinity connotes and invites emotions and acts which affirm the male self from which they emerge. Unlike the paired sexual ideal that informs women's sense of themselves, their sexuality and their destinies, ideal maleness does not respond to an outside gaze. Instead, it is defined by the power to look, assess, judge, measure and act. A little boy who dashes up a tree, while his sister hovers uncertainly on the ground; an older man plunges into a life of adventure and travel, while his wife or mother anxiously wait at home, hoping and praying for his safety. Men are confident, act as if it is given to them to do so, as if the entire world is theirs for the taking. While economic power, educational advantages and the familial and social roles they play inspire this easy confidence, this latter is always an embodied quality. That is, it marks a man's experiences and expressions of his body—both in relationship to others and to the world in which he lives.

If women's bodies are to please and be pleasing, men's bodies are expected to be expressive of a certain innate rude energy. Physical exercise, hard work, a healthy sexual appetite are taken to be typical male attributes and acts. If a man shuns any of the above, it is usually because he does so in the service of a higher and ostensibly loftier aim, such as the pursuit of truth or God. The dictum to men to be tough and energetic in turn creates its own specific anxieties and obsessions. While women are anxious to draw attention and feel

doomed if they do not, men press themselves upon the world and women, insistently making their presence felt through a loud tone of voice, firm footsteps, gestures that enable them effortlessly to colonize a room, a hall. This desire to be present in everything they do and say renders men narcissistic in the extreme. For the most part, they remain oddly opaque to a world that is not imprinted with their image, be it the nursery or the intimate inner world of emotions and relationships.

Men rarely however, see themselves thus: as bounded and hemmed in by their own selves and drives. Since they perceive themselves to be actors and agents, people who make things happen, they experience neither a sense of lack nor do they feel particularly inadequate. When they do feel either of these emotions, they are palpably handicapped, either physically slight and feminine, or impotent or simply sexually disabled.

Homosexual men, though, realize all too well, the limits to masculinity. They also know and experience first-hand, the pressures of being male. For these work to their disadvantage and, worse, prove oppressive. This is visible in instances of homosexual-bashing in parts of the United States of America, for example. But the criminalization of homosexuals and the tacit insistence that they conform to 'normal' masculine standards happen even in India. There are provisions in the Indian Penal Code which can and are used to harass and intimidate homosexual men.

What does it mean for a man to see himself as an agent, to experience initiative and dynamism? How do these sensibilities translate into expressive action? Generally speaking, a man attempts to affirm his sense of existence through the following means; his sexual character and appetite; his familial power; his status as the head of the household; his position in the outside world of work, peers; in terms of his relationship to authority. Let us consider each of these in turn. A man's relationship to sexuality, his body, his sexual needs, and desires is inextricably linked with his sense of his own importance as a superior human being whose appetites are natural, a sign of well-being. Hence his body becomes an instrument of performance.

Thus, whether he is exercising, grooming himself, or even attending to more mundane tasks, such as urinating on the road or boarding a running bus, he seeks to flaunt his maleness. He displays in each instance, his sense of physical prowess, charm, his ability to claim public space as his own, his dare-devilry.

Or consider that oddly named phenomenon: eve-teasing. It is perhaps the most perfect example of how a young man views himself and others, in this case, women, and his relationship to the immediate environment. He wolf-whistles at women, sings out lines from a well-chosen bawdy song, calls out obscene riddles, sometimes stalks the woman in question, lying in wait for her, even delighting in her horror, fear, her dread and anticipation of his presence. These acts express a self, a body that needs to harass and instil fear and humiliation in an unknown woman to even express its sexual emotion. The person of the woman does not matter, neither do her emotions, the fact that these things take place in a public context is of no consequence because for men, the world outside is their own, an almost marked territory. If women trespass, they must do so at their own peril. A desire to torment sits deliciously closely to a need thus to affirm one's maleness.

A sense of bravura, of power that delights in its ability to trouble others, especially women, gratuitously and pointlessly, enable men to wed love, even romantic love to violence. This could be the insidious violence of the chase, the hunt that pursues its quarry relentlessly, forcing it to yield at a point where the victim of the chase, feels near relief at not having to run anymore and is willing to surrender herself to a romance that means to devour her. This is a situation that ought to be all too familiar to us from our daily film fare. In other in-

stances, men demonstrate love in a combative fashion: to possess and win a woman at any cost and to wrest her away from another man, once again, to demand her undying loyalty and affection through sheer persistence. This is of course high romance, cultivated in pulp fiction and forming the stuff of romantic commonsense among youthful girls. There is another sort of violent love, where beating, abuse, jealousy and suspicion, a desire to seek out the beloved, only to hurt her, all have their place. This is more commonly found within institutionalized relationships, especially marriage. In all these instances, a man's attempts at loving is deeply intertwined with his need to establish his control over the romance, the body of the young woman, and underscore his possession of the latter.

Psychological reasons—such as those adduced by Dinnerstein and Kakar—may help us make sense of men's need to dominate and control. The material and social basis for this domination are, however, quite clear. Men's ability to exercise control over women's sexuality and male access to productive resources define their familial duties and their functions and roles in the outside world. Unlike women to whom marriage is the only legitimate avenue to companionship and sexual intimacy, for men, marriage is a social arrangement that services their sexual and emotional needs, without actually containing them. Besides, marriage helps him secure those conditions necessary for him to fan out into the world: to farm, work, sell, travel, intellectualize, and so on.

Fatherhood is neither an arduous task nor a responsibility for a man, on the other hand it grants him the authority to mark his children as his own. They are known by his name, will inherit from him and preserve his name in future. Men do not worry about children in an obsessive sort of way. Child-care happens, is part of the natural, organic female universe, where growth, nurture, and tending are to be expected. If the glory of motherhood is expounded in song, custom and litera-

ture, fatherhood enjoys a significant status in law, matters of the state—almost all government forms in India require us to fill in the name of the father. The status of a father is thus both biological and secular: as a father a man partakes of a civil identity. A father is the head of the household in most countries, most property documents exist in his name, his children are known by his patronymic. This civil identity places him in two worlds: the familial and the social. Motherhood on the other hand possesses no civil status and remains locked within the familial sphere of home, babies, nurture.

In turn, it may be said, it is the power that men wield in the outside world, as owners of property, managers of resources and workers, which grants their fatherly identity such civil significance. As we have seen, the authority of men came to prevail gradually, whether this was due to their control over female sexuality and labour, or their possession of productive resources or both. Male authority when it arrived and crystallized into its familiar forms, rooted itself in the spheres of reproduction as well as production.

At this point in our argument, we once again need to qualify the category 'men'. Not all men seek to possess or possess either the chance or the power to express their sexual energy, their will to authority. Poor men, men condemned to various forms of untouchability, disabled men, men of low social status—all of these are bound to an economics of survival and dependence. In this context, the imperative to be male, virile and in control can only seem ironic. On the other hand, as I have pointed out elsewhere, with reference to dalit men, even powerless men possess sexual authority, power over women's bodies, even if this is only within the space of their homes.

NORMS OF THE BODY

Beauty and virility, the experience of romance, the state of marriage, motherhood and fatherhood: these are pro-

duced and actualized in society through a complex of institutions and individuals. Among these are modes of dress, child-rearing practices, rites of passage that attend the onset of puberty in girls (and in some cases, of boys as well), social rituals that impress upon boys and girls their respective vocations (these are varied), everyday living in the course of which food, education, entertainment and leisure are allocated differently to boys and girls. Also included are the world of production which demands differently weighted tasks for boys and girls, the sphere of reproduction, which includes housework, child-care, care of the old and the sick, tasks which are clearly for girls, cultural codes, songs, stories, films, all of which uphold distinctive gender attributes and destinies. All these in association with each other create the conditions in which girls grow up, wanting to be beautiful and chaste, and boys, confident and virile.

These various social practices reach us through relationships: parents, peers, teachers, friends, a variety of people figure in the drama of growing up female or male. They exercise their influence on our bodies, minds, emotions and souls. But this does not happen through threats, coercive rules or the handing out of punishment. We act out, take in, embody these various injunctions. They figure in, are demonstrated through the relationships we live as mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, teenage girls and boys. Consequently, we do not view these various practices that direct us as coming from outside. As far as we are concerned, they constitute the very stuff of life and grant it form, direction and meaning.

Are we or are we not, then, victims of a system of power that cunningly controls our each and every movement? Not really. We are not passive recipients of messages, we decode them, express them through our emotional and ethical choices and preferences. Let us take the paired female ideal. We actualize it in any number of ways: by buying into the beauty myth, by actively

taking against women known for their fierce independence or sexual daring, by endorsing the myth of the self-sacrificing wife. We counsel friends who are in an unhappy marriage to 'somehow adjust', We convince ourselves and other women that the female of the species cannot seriously contemplate a life of solitude.

Or as men we practise double standards: demand monogamous loyalty from wives and girlfriends, while reserving for ourselves the right to philander. More generally, men tend to control and regulate the sexuality of those women who are within the familial network, while remaining appreciative and lustful of female promiscuity directed at them from outside the family.

Of course, both men and women flout norms, refuse to fall in line, yet everywhere they come up against real limits. A spunky woman who stands up bravely to sexual harassment, who refuses to remain demure and passive in the face of provocation finds out, sooner or later, that ultimately the streets are not safe for her, she also comes up against ingrained prejudices. People are wont to blame her for being forward and unfeminine. To her dismay she finds out that the law is not in her favour, and even if it is, it is interpreted by men who do not look kindly upon female freedom. Most important, she realizes that she does not possess the mobility and ease to feel entirely comfortable in public spaces, where she is made to feel uneasy, viewed as an illegitimate presence. It is as if she is being told that she belongs to the inner world, of home and family. The point is individuals may bend the norms to their advantage, but these norms do not bend all the way. There are limits that hold them back.

These limits are all too visible even in those instances, where the norm appears to have vanished. Take the case of men who wish to share housework and parenting, who are not self-conscious about being 'feminine'. Such men clearly have sought to distinguish themselves from an aggressive and imperious masculinity. Yet very few of these 'feminine' men who have broken the gender line

will settle for lesser wages, a semi-literate education and a low-status job. All attempts to be 'different' often collapse in the face of material interests and concerns.

The limits to rule-breaking constitute the outermost contours of a social system which we shall describe as patriarchy, keeping in mind the diverse interpretations of this system. These limits have to do with the material life lead by men and women and the roles and functions that are supposed to be innate to them. Thus, whatever interpretation we choose, it is clear that under patriarchy, women, whose lives are defined by reproduction and familial responsibilities, find themselves 'blocked' out of many experiences: for example, the freedom of the outdoors, a life of adventure, professions that require travel and mobility. Women also find it less easy to change their lives mid-way, should they desire it. For they are considered 'settled'—once they are married and have children, it is assumed life cannot be wanting in any respect. There are, of course, exceptions, but these are truly so.

Education and work enhance a woman's chances; to travel, newer friendships. Yet these chances are limited because women rarely imagine they deserve these things. They suffer guilt, should they utilize a holiday to get away somewhere on their own, wonder if they should have not involved the entire family in their travel plans. It may be said that women are convinced that experiences that lie beyond the ken of the family and the larger kinship network are not legitimate. Nor is the world so arranged that they can venture forth thus, without having to suffer guilt for it. Child-care, housework, kinship obligations—all these combine to render her world limited and closed. While matters have changed for educated, middle class women, their world continues to remain bounded. Their domestic and kinship responsibilities do not grow any less, simply because they have other things to do. They remain as tied to notions of traditional femininity as other women. There are, of course, kinds of inaccessibil-

ity. For instance, poorer women are more mobile, because of the nature of their work, but have fewer choices when it comes to education.

On the whole, men do not suffer from similar blockage, but their sense of themselves and the positions they occupy render them strangers to emotions and intimacies. While lack of access to experiences and resources work to women's disadvantage, men utilize their alienation from certain experiences to underscore their authority.

SUMMING UP

It is clear that norms of control lie at the very core of practices of gender. In the first instance, these norms are held in place by social and economic structures which determine a person's access to resources, culture and power. As we pointed out in the first chapter, men and women live out these norms, in the context of these structures, sometimes working against their grain, at other times, within the terms of their logic—but always performing roles, identities, fulfilling functions and expectations. This system of norms, structure and individual performances of norms together create a social order we recognize as patriarchal. Patriarchy, however, is not merely a regulated system, it is also the world we live in, embodied in the ways we eat, dress, speak, love and die.

Of the several elements which constitute patriarchy, gender is perhaps the most significant, because it allows for the articulation of power within relationships that are fundamental and intimate. In this sense, gender is not merely an ordering principle, a basis from which to understand how men and women came to be what they are today, but also a relationship. This relationship of the two sexes, mediated by ideas and structures, organizes our world in particular and hierarchical ways. Gender is thus not merely a methodological category but a way of signifying relationships of power.